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UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
5 APRIL 1983

WASHINGTON

Barbie

U.S. military intelligence officials recruited Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie to work as a secret agent in occupied Germany after World War II, it was reported Tuesday night.

CBS News said documents not yet made public show Barbie, now facing trial in France for war crimes, became a secret agent, "paid for and protected by American intelligence in postwar Germany" from 1947-50.

The network said Barbie's first assignment was to provide information about suspected communist influence in the French government and security services, using his war-time contacts as a Nazi SS officer combatting the French resistance in Lyons.

In addition, the network said U.S. military intelligence officials discussed recruiting Barbie in the mid 1960s at the time of the Che Guevara insurgency in Bolivia, but the CIA rejected the idea.

CBS also reported U.S. officials issued a transit visa to Barbie, under an alias, for his escape from Germany to Argentina and then Bolivia, where he remained for 32 years.

The Justice Department is investigating Barbie's relationship with the United States from the end of World War II to his arrest by French authorities in February.

Department officials in March confirmed Barbie, known as the "Butcher of Lyons," entered the United States four times in 1969 and 1970, but they said there was no evidence he was aided by the U.S. government.

CBS quoted Col. Earl Browning of Army intelligence as saying Barbie's "name appeared on the list submitted for authorization to use an informant" in occupied Germany.

"He was being used through the back door, I guess you could say," Browning told CBS.

Browning said he ordered Barbie's arrest in 1947, but documents show that for unexplained reasons, he was not taken into custody. Instead American intelligence kept employing him.

Gene Bramel, identified by CBS as a former U.S. intelligence official, said: "We knew that Barbie had been a Gestapo officer. We knew that there (were) various ways that he was wanted by the French. We didn't care."

France formally requested Barbie's extradition in 1949 without success. One French document noted: "Barbie enjoys the protection of American occupation authorities," CBS reported.

The network said the reasons for Barbie's U.S. postwar ties are clouded, "but these were early Cold War years when combatting Soviet influence took first priority."